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Background to the murder of Major Denis Mahon, Strokestown Park, County Roscommon on 2 November, 1847.

by

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Olivia Mc Cormack, August, 1994.

Abbreviations

N.H.I., V.	W.E. Vaughan (ed.) A New History of Ireland vol.v: Ireland under the Union 1801-70 (Oxford 1989)
N.L.	National Library of Ireland
P.M.	Pakenham - Mahon papers
I.E.S.H.	Irish Economic and Social History Journal
S.P.	Strokestown Park

Introduction

The Mahon family have resided at Strokestown Park since the latter 17th Century. King Charles II rewarded Nicholas Mahon with two grants of land at Strokestown, County Roscommon, for services rendered to the crown. The estate continued within the family through turbulent periods of Irish history. In 1800, Maurice Mahon was bestowed with the title of first Baron Hartland of Strokestown. This peerage was a further reward by the British crown for voting for the Act of Union. However, the prestigious title became extinct in 1845 on the death of Maurice, grandson of the first Baron Hartland. The estate, which consisted of approximately nine thousand acres, was inherited by his nephew Major Denis Mahon. He is distinctly memorable on account of his contentious murder on 2 November 1847.

Major Mahon was unfortunate to inherit the estate during the turbulent famine years. He was not a man to embrace reform of the landed system. His views remained fervently within the undefined relationship between landlord and tenant. He continued oblivious to the real situation of County Roscommon and was unaware of the high rate of agrarian unrest among the rural population.

The catastrophic Irish famine was the greatest disaster to affect 19th Century Europe. The decades leading up to the famine saw the political activation of small localities which brought an intensification of antipathy in the relationship between landlord and tenant. This relationship was integral to the mechanics of society in pre-famine Ireland and has been utilised in historiography as a means of promoting a political agenda.

19th Century histography marked a new departure in historical writing as it became more aligned with contemporary political issues. There was an awakening of an Irish Catholic national identity which was translated into a growing movement for the repeal of the legislative Act of Union. Protestants reacted by restructuring their bonds in order to strengthen their ties with England. The duration and aftermath of the famine saw a sparse number of commentaries published on the catastrophe. The most notable were Issac Butt's A Voice for Ireland (Dublin 1847) and Sir Charles Trevelyan's 'The Irish Crisis' published in The Edinburgh Review in 1847. Both works commented on the Irish famine prior to 1847 and were therefore relinquished of the task of depicting the Great Famine as an historical event. That task was accomplished by Canon John O' Rourke's The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847 (Dublin, 1875). He acknowledges the value of Trevelyan's work for the statistical information provided. Yet. he warns the reader of Trevelyan's role as secretary to the treasury during the famine and obviously the conclusions drawn differ greatly. The growth of National consciousness became reflective of the apportionment of blame which ensued 'black 47'. However, Canon O' Rourke fails to acknowledge that Trevelyan's work is not dealing with the famine as a whole and was published before the extremities of '47 and '48.

The growth of Nationalism and the assertion of the body politic meant that a large number of histories on the famine remained in a nationalist vein. In that sense the famine was seen as the utilisation of a natural disaster for the exploitation of a whole nation. These teleological approaches were aimed at condemning England for their laisser-faire attitude. These aspects were prominent in early 20th Century

historography in the writings of Frank Gallagher and P.S. O' Hegarty. History was used to reflect current trends of Nationalism. In doing so they were asserting Ireland's right to independence and self-determination.

The later 20th Century historiography has shown a fresh approach to the history of the Great Famine. The most noteworthy general analyses of the famine are Woodham-Smith's The Great Hunger (London 1962), Edwards and Williams' The Great Irish Famine (Dublin 1956), and Mary Daly's The Famine in Ireland (Dublin 1986). They are an invaluable introduction to a general famine outlook yet, they pale in comparison to the new surge in famine intrigue. The famine is no longer a mere analysis of political history. The increased use of economics and statistics have shown the famine in a more accurate light. Economic historians like Joel Mokry and Cormac Ó Grada have used statistics to redefine the social categories within Ireland. The old adage that Catholic Ireland was starved has abated. The complexity of the Irish famine has been noted without minimalising the suffering or catastrophic results of the famine.

This study attempts to amalgamate the papers of the Pakenham-Mahon estate and place them within a general famine context. The aim is to analyse the relationship between the Mahon family and their tenants. The detailed Mahon estate papers show Strokestown as a microcosm of the tensions which existed within the landlord-tenant relationship in Ireland. The Mahon estate is worthy of such analysis as the tensions culminated in the murder of Major Mahon at the height of the famine. Despite this atrocity the Mahon family did not sell and flee Ireland like

other landed proprietors. The family remained in residence at Strokestown park until the death of Olive Hales Pakenham-Mahon in 1982. The park was purchased by Jim Callery and Westward Garage Ltd. in 1979, when it consisted of only three hundred acres. The new owners must be commended for their utilisation of an historical site, for rekindling and re-educating us on the Irish famine.

Chapter 1

> "The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race"[1]

Malthus propounded the theory that the rapidly growing population would soon increase beyond the capacity to feed it and that controls on population were therefore necessary to prevent catastrophe, thus claiming that disasters are a natural necessity to remove excess population.

The long cold spell of 1740 brought widespread famine and disease to Europe, Ireland and Norway were the worst affected areas. The conjectural mortality rates have claimed that the 18th century famine was a greater killer than the Great Famine of mid-19th century.[2] Within the one hundred years that separated the two major disasters, Ireland suffered from intermittent small famines, crises years of 1755, 1766 and 1783 were wide spread across the country.[3] Ireland shared the crises of 1800-1 and 1816-19 with the rest of Europe. These Irish mini-famines, in the light of Malthusian analysis failed in their mission to halt population growth. This can be attributed to the general improvement in Irish trade and economy. In the pre-famine decades Irish food exports increased dramatically. This was achieved by a new banking system and a large network of roads which made travelling quicker and less

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1 Thomas Robert Malthus, Essay on the principle of population pp 118-19, C. Ó Grada, The Great Famine (Dublin 1989) 33

2 C. Ó Grada, The Great Famine 19

3 ibid.,

cumbersome.[4] Although Irish agriculture had never been portrayed as industrious, the most significant point to be noted, is that mass starvation was avoided for so long.[5] A legacy of the intermittent famines, the increase in marriages and growing food exports was manifested in a growing dependency on the potato within Irish rural society:

> When I see the people of a country with well formed bodies, and their cottages swarming with children; when I see their men athletic and their women beautiful, I know not how to believe them subsisting on an unwholesome food.[6]

The potato had positive effects on Irish society, in terms of calories it increased the supply of food available. It improved rather than worsened the quality of food consumed by the lower classes i.e. the vast bulk of the population. This resulted from beneficial nutrients such as calcium, iron, thiamine, niacin and vitamin C,[7] which potatoes contained. However, in comparison to grain it was difficult to store and transport. This restricted any positive effects to localities and to limited parts of the year. Yet despite the nutritional value, which has only been recognised in modern studies, the natural reaction of onlookers was one of abhorrence to the lack of variety in the Irish diet. Johann George Kohl in his Travels in Ireland observed that

> "Every other day they feed on potatoes and nothing but potatoes. Now this is inhuman; for the appetite and stomach of men claim variety in food, and nowhere else do we find human beings gnawing, from year's end to end, at the same root, berry or weed.

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4 ibid.,27

5 ibid.,

6 A. Young, A Tour of Ireland, (London 1790); J. Mokyr 'Irish history with the potato'Irish Economic and Social history Journal (1981) pp8-29

7 ibid., Mokyr 8

There are animals who do so, but human beings, nowhere except in Ireland"[8]

In early 19th century Ireland there was a growing environment for change. At the turn of the Century the Act of Union had voted the Irish House of Commons out of existence, and this had given the English House the right to legislate for Ireland. The guarantee of Catholic Emancipation in 1800, remained an unattained goal. It became predominant in shaping the future character of Anglo-Irish political relations.[9] As a result it increased the divide between Protestant and Catholic communities, who were themselves also divided over the political implications. A new influential development was the growing involvement of priests and catholic hierarchy in the political arena.[10] Likewise, the early 19th century saw the initial stages in the politicisation of the rural poor which were marked by the rise of secret societies, especially Ribbonism.[11] Ribbonism was aligned closely to economic issues. It is specified because it was generically applied to all agrarian unrest, such unrest was endemic throughout the countryside in the half century before the famine.[12] Similarly, the Catholic Association represented the mobilisation of Catholic power at all levels, which was directed almost entirely at Westminster. It indoctrined the Catholic community with an ideology of resistance and taught the tactics of

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8 ibid., Johann George Kohl Travels in Ireland (London (1844).

9 Oliver Mac Donagh 'Ireland and the Union 1801-70' in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), A New history of Ireland, Vol 5, (Hereafter N.H.I.,V.) pxlix

10 ibid.,

11 J.Lee 'The Ribbonism' in T.D. Williams (ed), Secret Societies in Ireland (Dublin, 1973, 27

12 ibid.,

demonstration.[13] The Catholic relief act of 1829 did not end this type of political behaviour which long denial had brought into existence.[14] The general feeling of anticipation and hope brought by Daniel O' Connell in the cause of Catholic emancipation failed to change the lot of the ordinary tenant farmer. O' Connell maintained a strong aversion to violence and his faith in the rights of private property severely restricted his willingness to use agrarian unrest for political ends.[15] Cottiers, the backbone of Ribbon societies were less infused with national rather than Catholic consciousness. Their localisation and lack of organisation made them less involved in political issues and more directly aligned to agrarian causes.[16] This growing environment of small scale agitation had impact on the tender relationship that existed between landlord and tenant. This growing divide was consolidated by the fact that most landlords were Protestant and most tenants Catholic:

> Something must be done to restrain the enormous accumulation of property in single hands, men must distinguish clearly between small tenancies and small properties; the former, as in Ireland are but a source of sevility, wretchedness, and crime, the latter, as in Norway, and in every other country where they have ever existed, have been a source no less sure of independence, comfort and virtue.[17]

The relationship between landlord and tenant was defined by certain structural stipulations such as a lease. Leasing arose in the early 17th

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13 Op cit, Vaughan

14 ibid.,

15 J.S. Donnelly jr's 'A famine in Irish politics' (pp356-371) in Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I..V. pp356-371

16 op cit., Lee

17. Jonathan Pim, The Conditions and Prospects of Ireland (Dublin, 1848) p43

Century as a method of estate management. It resulted from operational difficulties incurred by new owners and created a need to develop contractual relationships with tenants . It was attributed to the Irish situation which was accustomed to having large sized estates where absenteeism was rife:[18]

> tenants will not hold land in Ireland from year to year as in England but expect leases of 21 years sometimes 40 years or three lives. For in Ireland the tenants make all repairs and improvements at their own charge consequently land there must be leased out or lie waste.[19]

The records of the Mahon Estate, Strokestown, Co. Roscommon disclose that any improvements or building were carried out by the tenant, under the guidance of direct stipulation laid down by the landlord:

> If W. Kelly will build on his plot a house two stories high the whole length of the front of his plot and 18 feet wide in the clear, roof it with good foreign timber and slate it with Killaloe slates within five years from the 1st May last, Wm. Mahon will then give him a lease of it and his plot for sixty-one years at four pounds a year.[20]

Such stipulations had to be complied with in order to secure a lease. This emphasises the influential aspect and concern for detail that existed in the Mahon estate. As a result of the lengthy leases customary to Ireland, conditions did not merely concern the immediate leasee but also pigeon-holed heirs to comply. The fixture of rent within the lease was a drawback for the Mahon estate. It could not appreciate for the duration of the lease, whether it be twenty one years or three lives. Yet such a

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18 David Dickson's 'Middlemen' in Tom Bartlett (ed.), Penal Era and Golden Age (Belfast, 1979) pp162-185

19 ibid.,173

20 30 Aug 1786, Pakenham-Mahon Papers (hereafter P.M) NL MS 10,152

lease guaranteed security of holding and revenue for the estate despite being at a reduced level. In addition to money, it was accustomed for the estate to specify some farm produce within the rent criteria:

> Rent thirty five pounds twelve shillings and six pence together with two loads of wheat straw annually, weight 500 each.[21]

In a typical lease, leasees and heirs would be liable to a fine if thought to be neglecting their property. These leases also inhibited tenants by imposing fines 'for every occasion of grinding malt at the mill at Castlerea or for every occasion of tucking cloth at said mill'.[22] The ability to enforce such fines would be virtually impossible. Yet, the threat of doing so underlines the practical elements of a lease:

> the leases and sub-leases in perpetuity, which absentee owners of land deemed it their interest to grant, for the purpose of devolving the cares and duties of landlord on someone who might be better able to perform them, and thus securing to themselves a more certain though it may be a smaller rental.'[23]

In the tiered land system, farmers had priority over cottiers, they held a dual status in that they were both landlord and tenant. Cottiers, who were most commonly found in Leinster, were farm labourers who rented small portions of land annually from his employer. In rent payment, he worked a fixed number of days on the employer's farm. In Connacht, the conacre system was most common and used extensively on the Mahon estate. This was a system in which casual labourers made an annual arrangement to rent small plots as potato ground. This was a long-

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21 1 July 1785 ibid.,

22 undated, ibid.,

23 Pim, Op cit.,

standing cause of conflict between the labourer, farmer and landlord.[24] Due to the lack of continuity, landlords usually charged more than twice what would ordinarily have been payable on a leased holding. The labourers' financial condition meant he had no alternative than to comply to large rents.

The rapid growth in population before the famine led to increased demand for holdings and large scale sub-division of land. The 1841 census has recorded the Irish population as 8,175,124 which indicates a growth of 175 per cent since 1780, making Ireland one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. In Roscommon alone, the population had risen from 158,110 in 1813 to 253,491 in 1841, an increase of 60 per cent.[25] The Mahons capitalised on this demand and utilised every aspect of their estate. They surveyed their land in order to partition it into such grades as choice ground, good ground, capital ground or light ground.[26] Consequently, the rent charges reflected such grades. Resulting from the increase in population, poor land could command large rents as the substantial demand left people susceptible to exploitation. This is indicative of the commanding position landlords possessed in pre-famine Ireland. Undeterred by minor criticism, Thomas Mahon, second Baron Hartland of Strokestown, initiated drainage of bogs which were subsequently leased out. He contemplated redressing this inadequate partitioning of land by providing elements of good and

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24 Stephen J. Campbell, The Great Irish Famine. words and images from the Famine Museum Strokestown Park, County Roscommon. 14

25 ibid., and T.W Freeman, Pre-famine Ireland. A Study in Historical geography. (Manchester, 1957) 242

26 undated, P.M. papers, N.L. MS10,152

bad land to each tenant.[27] However, this balanced approach did not materialise. On closer examination, Mahon realised that it would not be economically viable as it would involve restructuring the partitions of the whole estate at immense cost.

Irish estates provided landlords with an income to uphold a privileged existence of annual social seasons, which extended from Ireland to England and the continent. However, the workings of the landed class are far more complicated than the picture might first portray. They often upheld a social existence which over-extended their income as they tried to compete on the same standing as their English counterparts.[28] This was impossible as rents and revenues did not amass the equivalent amounts as in England.[29] Nevertheless, the overpricing of bad land was not merely imposed to take advantage of tenant farmers but to secure revenue for the estate. It became a mutual necessity, the large population caused difficulty for tenants to secure land, and likewise landlords were under strain to gather revenue.

This strain partially resulted from a sustained period of economic difficulty which affected agricultural prices in the early 1830s. Issac Weld noted that:

> everything at Strokestown does not wear the appearance of progressive improvement.[30]

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27 27 Dec. 1830 P.M. papers NL MS10,100

28 C. Ó Grada, The Great Famine (Dublin 1989)

29 ibid.,

30 Issac Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (Dublin, 1832) 323

Local fairs in County Roscommon, like Strokestown and Croghan were affected by this economic depression. Markets were held weekly at Strokestown and were 'numerously attended and give a lively bustling feeling to the place'.[31] However, sales of stock declined dramatically and were only accomplished at reduced prices. This affected both the Mahons and tenants, as each group respectively depended on disposing of a certain quantity of stock annually.[32] It was not just a local phenomenon but one that was obvious by the fall in meat prices at the Dublin market. The price reduction was triggered by excess stock on the English market which also caused hardship for the English grazing farmer. In Ireland this affected the ability of tenants to pay rents. A factor which did not elude Tom Conry (agent):

> The real difficulty in my mind under which this county now labours is a total want of money and credit, it is impossible to collect rent the people have not the means of payment.[33]

He identified this crisis for Thomas Mahon who realised it would be financially unviable for the estate to waver rents or allow them to remain unpaid. He concluded that different measures would have to be reached in order to combat the crisis. This difficult economic climate did not hold the same proportion of destruction for the parties involved. In order to maintain the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed, the Mahon estate pressurised tenants to pay rent and used the threat of eviction in order to force even minimal rent payment. On such occurrences tenants utilised any opportunity, to avoid ruin and eviction

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31 ibid.,

32 23 Nov 1829, P.M. Papers NL MS10,099.3

33 4 June 1831, ibid.,

which they often accomplished by expressing dissatisfaction with the landlords representatives.[34] Tenants refused to pay their rents to hired agents who did not possess sufficient qualifications. Similarly, tenants used this argument as a ploy to delay payment of rent. This became a common gripe, as tenants began to question the responsibility and credibility of rent collectors. In addition, tenants petitioned the Mahon estate for support by allowing them to pay rents with credits. Nevertheless, these attempts at postponing eviction did not always succeed. If eviction seemed inevitable some tenants used the cost of eviction to evade the arrears owed:

> I am ready to hand it (rent) over for your lordships use and also to surrender the lease of those premises and give possession immediately provided you give me release for all rent which may be due to 1 November next year, which in fact is but a trifle and not one half the cost of an ejectment.[35]

As evident, tenants could evade arrears by vacating and using the cost of their ejection against the landlord. Obviously this case quoted can not be regarded as mainstream as many tenants would not possess the means of removal to a different area. Landlords proved to be pitiless in the pressure they exerted on tenants for rent payment. They too had to combat relentless creditors for debts which had amassed from their lavish style of living assumed before 1815.[36] It was difficult to support an estate and creditors under the conditions of depressed markets and

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34 27 Dec 1830, ibid.,

35 14 May 1831, P.M. Papers NL MS 10,099.2

36 Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I.,V. 344

lagging rents, together with defective laws that permitted the accumulation of debts far beyond the value of estates.[37]

In these precarious conditions, under-tenants found it necessary to retain their property for as long as possible. They realised that the chances of reletting land were minimal in view of the scarcity of rentable property opportunities and lack of finance. It especially affected those involved in sub-letting land. The failure of an overtenant to pay rent resulted in the undertenants suffering the consequences of eviction. This also applied if an overtenant died without an heir or their lease had reached its renewable date. The inadequacies of sub-letting are clearly shown on the Mahon estate.[38] Twenty eight families were evicted as a consequence of the death of Mr. William Kelly.[39] These tenants suffered the congestion of subdivision and were at the mercy of difficult times and a larger landlord. Such factors did not escape the notice of Tom Conry:

> in all my life I never performed so disagreeable a duty, the poor creatures quit it with extreme reluctance still they were perfectly obedient to the law. It will remain tenantless for this year as no person would venture to take it:[40]

It is not merely necessary to recognise their plight without making an attempt to rectify the situation. It presents a difficult scenario, recognition and a degree of power in the hands of an agent without an attempt to alleviate the stresses of such situations. It remained beneficial

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37 ibid.,

38 10 Dec 1831, op. cit.,

39 ibid.,

40 2 May 1831, ibid.,

to the estate to clear undertenants as a larger holding would yield more revenue despite the fact that cleared land would produce no returns for one year.

Landlords held a dominant position in 19th Century Ireland and their strenghts were manifested in many ways. Consternation arose between Thomas Mahon and Michael Balf over the purchase of a farm in Ballintobber, Co. Roscommon. Thomas Mahon was rarely challenged due to his privileged position and his financial ability to outbid his competitors. However, the phrases used to describe his competitor, in this instance, showed immense dissatisfaction over such a challenge:

> that little wretch Michael Balf .....all the little tricks and underhand work of little miserable Balf.[41]

Such a challenge increased his determination to secure the farm with little regard to the expense. It highlights the inability of small landholders to compete with the monopoly of larger land proprietors, like Thomas Mahon, and the stalemate that existed in the Irish social scene.

These tensions within the landlord-tenant relationship were not merely manifested in the immediate pre-famine decades. It was a relationship which had remained constant and unchanging over a long period. Evictions were not just a famine phenomenon, though the scale greatly increased. The Mahon estate in Strokestown hold records of evictions dating from mid 18th century. Likewise, tenants did not merely cease paying rent as a result of the famine. Often families held large arrears

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41 15 Dec 1828, P.M. Papers NL MS 10,099.1

which were diligently recorded.[42] Obviously, both factors caused irritation to the relationship between landlord and tenant.

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42 3 Jan 1831, P.M Papers NL MS 10,152

Chapter 2

Landed proprietors held a dominant position in Irish society, but they often suffered restrictions resulting from the economic climate and inability to collect rents. There has been a consistent failure to realise the financial distress landlords faced. In the Mahon case, a number of difficulties present themselves which echo across generations of successive landlords. They typify the financial outlays which all landed proprietors would have faced at some period.

An estate was headed by the leading member of the family but in truth it could not be regarded as his estate but a family business. Each member of the immediate family had a claim on the estate - in the form of annual allowances which proved a substantial drain on estate revenue, while titular heads of the family, Thomas, Maurice and Denis Mahon yielded an annual income of £4,000 from the estate.[1] Moreover, the Dowager Lady Hartland, wife of Maurice, first Baron Hartland, received £900 annually until her death in 1834.[2] Her daughter-in-law, Catherine, second Lady Hartland, succeeded to her privileged position, receiving a similar sum.[3]

In addition to annual allowances attributed to family members, the estate revenue also covered overheads, the cost of running the house, servants wages and the employment of agents and surveyors. These financial outlays were intermittently compounded by the necessity to purchase commissions in the army at the cost of approximately £1,200. Similarly,

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1 Jan 1828, P.M. Papers NL MS 10,099.1

2 ibid.,

3 ibid.,

landlords also had to deal with inherited debts, debts unpaid by their predecessors. There is an instance of this on the Mahon estate in 1829, when it was necessary to discharge an inherited bond debt. This could only be accomplished by borrowing '£2,000 each in three bond debts at 5 per cent'.[4] This, the necessity to acquire further loans to pay off previous ones, is not an isolated case but appears on occasions in the papers. The Report of the Commissioners for the Enquiry into the occupation of land in Ireland identified 'that the proprietors are bound up by strict settlement and that they are embarrassed by mortgages and family charges'.[5]

The entailment of estates and the consequences felt by some inheritors are clearly seen in the case of the Kelly family of CastleKelly, relatives of the Mahons by marriage. An agreement was drawn up between D. Kelly and his father. It 'concluded the arrangement for handing over the whole estate to me (D. Kelly), I allocate to him a regular annuity and taking upon me all his bills and other debts, this thank God I am able to do but it pressures me a little till the rents come in'.[6] This instance highlights the dependence of landlords on the prompt remittal of rents to deal with such financial outlays. This case also accentuates the extent of support structure that existed among the landed class. Castlekelly additionally possessed bond debts which resulted in an investment by Denis Mahon of £1,000 to be repaid at 6% interest.[7] The existence of such support systems resulted from the potential financial imcumbrance

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4 29 April 1855, P.M Papers NL MS 10,120.3

5 'Report of Commissioners for Enquiry into the occupation of land in Ireland', Parlimentary Report 1848 Vol. xix; Jonathan Pim, The Conditions and prospects of Ireland (Dublin, 1848) 12

6 Feb 1833, P M Papers N.L. MS10,101.1

7 ibid.,

of estates. It incorporated contracts of a diligent nature which involved borrowing or lending money or the underwriting of loans. It was not an institutionalised structural system but a relaxed one of mutual benefit. Nevertheless, it is a system which possessed both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are obvious: the guarantee of amassing small amounts of money without approaching a bank; the insurance policy of a fellow landlord underwriting a loan. On occasions the latter caused problems, as the dowager Lady Hartland was wont to learn. She endorsed two bills of exchange for Lord Kingston, one amounted to £1,700 the other for £5,000. On the repayment date, Lord Kingston was unable to remit the sum due and Lady Hartland became liable for the full amount.[8] It became necessary to press the estate for additional funds in order to meet the amount.[9] This was not a regular occurrence within this class support structure, it was regarded as a matter of honour that the amount would be repaid before the underwriter became liable.

This may seem like a bleak picture of inherited debts, bonds, loans, economic difficulties and rent stalemate. Despite this, they maintained a high standard of living. The big house and the demesne continued to be improved, as in 1829, refurbishments took place regardless of the inability of tenants to pay rents.[10] Similarly, the social seasons, the shooting parties and the fox hunts continued irrespective of the economic climate and tenants' hardship. A factor that became acutely obvious during the famine and resulted in harsh consequences. However, the

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8 4 July 1830, P M Papers N.L. MS 10,099.2

9 ibid.,

10 29 Dec. 1929, P. M. Papers NL MS 10,099.3

roots of this problem have been an integral part in the historic relationship between landlord and tenant.[11]

The dominant theme of Irish politics in 1820-40 was the sectarian contest for the preservation of the protestant ascendancy, material and symbolic alike.[12] There was a concrete movement emerging in the 1820s under the astute leadership of Daniel O' Connell. It was an attempt to redress the political monopoly of the protestant landed classes. It consisted of the rise of the Roman Catholic party with controlled agitation in pursuit of Catholic emancipation, which was granted in 1829. This concession caused concern among the landed proprietors of Co. Roscommon. They suddenly realised that their stronghold on local elections was under threat. They feared the power of the priests over catholic voters who would no longer be guided in these matters by the allegiances of their landlord. These factors were immaterial to ordinary tenant farmers, who had hoped Catholic emancipation would alleviate elements of their situation. There was a continuing movement toward repeal of the Union, with a hope that the political environment of Ireland would change. This environment, with bouts of agitation, undermined the safe hold of the landed proprietors in the county, and generated a split among them over the use of political avenues to combat the changing environment. Behind the unrest lay deep causes, old memories and grievances as well as the failure of the Act of Union to bring with it clear political or economic advantages. Above all, it was the poverty of large numbers of the people

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11 L. P. Curtis, 'Incumbered Wealth: Landed Indebtedness in post-famine Ireland', The American Historical Review 85/2 (1980)

12 Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I..V. plu

and the virtually bankrupt condition of many in this Irish agricultural society which constituted the immediate source of instability.[13]

The landed proprietors of Co. Roscommon recognised that 'an end to Agrarian outrage is of the utmost importance to the welfare of Ireland. Until this be done, nothing effectual is gained. The supremacy of law, and security of life and property are essential to improvement'.[14]

Division emerged within the class over discussions to surpress outbursts of agitation in the locality which were viewed as 'injurious to the peace of the county'.[15] Two resolutions were under consideration to redress these outbursts, the first, 'a memorial to the government requesting reinactment of the Insurrection Act'; the second, a resolution that the government should adopt such measures as would in future 'ensure tranquillity'[16] The meeting ended unresolved and two factions emerged which were to remain over frequent discussions on local politics. As a result of the lack of unanimity, agitation continued and the Catholic party gathered confidence, inadvertedly gaining more local support for repeal of the Union. The division of the landed proprietors led to contradictory information been forwarded to the government. They petitioned for a stipendiary magistrate to reside in the county,[17] meanwhile informing the government that Roscommon was a perfect state of tranquility.[18] The

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13 Kevin B. Nowlan's 'Famine and the failure of parliament' in Brian Farrell (ed.), The Irish parliamentary tradition (London 1965) pp 170-180

14 Op cit, Pim 185

15 19 Nov 1829, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.1

16 ibid.,

17 16 Dec. 1829, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.1

18 ibid.,

appeal for a magistrate was a moderate compromise which appealed to neither of the groups and was an inadequate answer to solving the agitation crisis.

Their choice to surpress agitation was merely a short term solution which resulted in a period of dormancy followed by more acute, determined agitators seeking solutions. The inability of the landed proprietors to recognise this showed political naiveity and a lack of understanding the Irish situation. This misjudgement of the situation can be directly linked to the extent of absenteeism that existed within the country. Many landlords within Co. Roscommon regarded themselves as diligent by returning from England to attend meetings regarding suppression of local agitation, elections and the issue of repeal of the Union, which was causing increased anxiety. However, by returning to Ireland for such specific causes they were relying on second hand information to maintain any awareness of current situations. Thomas Mahon attended no local meetings and relied completely on Tom Conry to represent the Mahon family.[19] Yet, he supported other local landowners who wished to increase the number of yeomanry within the county due to 'these perilous times'.[20] Nevertheless, this agitation was not merely a unique situation in Ireland but also affected the ordinary tenant farmer in England, although it subsided at a more rapid rate:

> The burning and disturbances in many counties in England, relative to provision and employment of the agricultural poor have nearly subsided, it is thought an understanding and compromise between

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19. 20 Jan 1831, ibid.,

20. ibid.,

> the parson, the landlord and the farmer will be adopted so as to regulate the sufficient subsistence for the labourer.[21]

This opportunity to mediate between landlord, tenant and parson was an unrealistic possibility in regard to the Irish situation, due to the fear and threat landed proprietors felt from catholics.

The Catholic party were looking for repeal of the Union, to tax absentees, abolish tithes and titles of present landed proprietors.[22] Thomas Mahon was quite firm in his opposition to such changes of which he proclaimed 'Thus far and no further shalt thou go'.[23] This attitude is clearly evident in his opinions and allegiances to the candidates in the 1831 election. He felt the urgent need to return a candidate who would support the needs of the landed proprietors and the established church.[24] As a result of his absenteeism and his lack of direct political involvement, he doubted his ability to influence his small number of voting tenantry, whom he viewed as 'papists who would be lead by the priests'.[25] He was fervently opposed to the French candidature who supported reform and repeal of the Union. But he felt the necessity to maintain a respective distance to prevent any repercussions which may result due to his allegiances:

> there was no compliment due to the Frenches, they were always in opposition to your family. The Catholic party would say we did it

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21. 6 Dec 1830, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.4
22. 23 Jan 1831, P M Papers NL MS 10,009.5
23 ibid.,
24 2 May 1831, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.2
25 ibid.,

from bigotry, in these times it is more wise to steer clear of any party feeling.[26]

Thomas Mahon opposed the Catholic party as he felt threatened by their strength and the support they commanded from Catholic tenants. As a result of the withdrawal of William Lloyd, who was representing the landed interest, Thomas Mahon had to rethink his strategy in regards to the election. He choose to support O' Connor Don who, he felt, would have support among protestants and catholics. He hoped that his candidature would unite the disparaging elements of both. He gave his support discreetly as he anticipated a short parliament and did not want his allegiances to damage his standing among the community of landed proprietors.[27] This wish to look towards similarities and to compromise in a view to uniting both sides was a short lived show of balanced judgement. It was one that was not held by the inheritors of the Mahon estate.

Although in earlier situations there was a split among the protestant classes within the county, yet they recognised the need in time of crisis to present a common protestant front in the face of popery. It became significant during this period that a large number of Irish protestants converted to tory-unionism which led to a decline of liberalism and a radicalism in their ranks.[28] The most immediate fear that crossed both generations of the Mahon family, was the possibility of repeal of the Union. This was seen as a catalyst in regard to the growing support the movement gathered through the 1830s. Though they had regarded it as

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26. 14 May 1831, ibid.,

27. 5 May 1831, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.5

28 Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I..V. plu

'the vain efforts of repeal of the union',[29] they felt obliged to make a declaration to the government warning against the consequences of such actions:

> we the undersigned, landed proprietors and residents of the county of Roscommon feel ourselves call'd upon, in consequences of the efforts now making to affect a repeal of the legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland .....to declare our anxiety for the permanence of british connexion, it being our decided opinion that such repeal would be destructive of the interests of all classes in Ireland and end in the dismemberment of the British Empire.[30]

This document was signed by Lord Hartland of Strokestown and four other leading landed proprietors - Lorton, Sandford, Westmeath and Clonbrook. It is evident from this that the influence of agitators and the degree of parliamentary support for repeal had become cause for concern. The threat of the repeal agitators is reinforced by the refusal of Mr Walsh of the position of sheriff due to the situation being 'attended with so much difficulty and danger'.[31] This increased fear of agitation led to the introduction of military juries and an increase in yeomanry to suppress outbursts and ensure tranquillity for the county.[32] The strategy and tactics of the Catholic party as used in the 1820s failed to produce a similar breakthrough. This was not because the implied threat of possible revolution appeared less credible in British eyes than it had earlier, but rather because British politicians feared the consequences of Catholic emancipation far less than they did those of repeal. The British

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29 11 Nov 1830, P M Papers NL MS 10,099.6

30 10 March 1831, ibid., and Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I..V. plu

31 undated, P M Papers N.L. MS 10,100

32 10 March 1833, P M Papers NL MS 10,101.1

political elite believed that if repeal was accomplished it would lead ultimately to the disintegration of the British empire.[33] This fear of Repeal was one of the few uniting factors between the proprietors of Ireland who, inspired controversy and contention on both sides of the sea.

The 1830s reflect the dissatisfaction of tenant farmers and catholic landholders with the situation in Ireland. This dissatisfaction was reflected in the increased instances of agitation and a conscious effort to use parliamentary means in an attempt to rectify it. The Protestant landed proprietors, like the Mahons, felt their situations and standing were under threat. This caused further tensions and lack of understanding within the landlord-tenant relationship. It emphasises that these factors within the relationship were not unique or merely materialised as a result of the Great Famine. The famine was a catalyst in that the factors of agitation and dissatisfaction were elevated to a higher degree. However, their force was compounded in the 1830s and was subsequently increased by the plight of tenants during the famine. As a result there were substantial difficulties within the landlord-tenant structure which catapulted into such extremes as the murder of Major Denis Mahon in 1847.

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33 J S Donnelly Jr 's,'A famine in Irish politics' in W E Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I.,V. 357

Chapter 3

Reverend Maurice Mahon acceded to the title of third Baron Hartland of Strokestown on the death of his brother Thomas, on 8 Dec. 1835. Maurice suffered from mental illness and in 1836 the Court of Chancery officially pronounced him a lunatic and seized his estates. The court recognised Major Denis Mahon as his heir presumptive and an order was made appointing him head of a committee over Maurice and his estates.[1] Family consternation and dispute arose over Major Mahon's administration of the committee and the estate, despite he being answerable to the court. Under the guardianship of the committee, extensive maintenace and refurbishment was initiated at Strokestown house. Mr Mc Causland, cousin of Major Mahon, accused the committee of over expenditure. He filed an affidavit recording grants amounting to £2818-4-4 during the period 1839-42 and accused the Major of interest simply as heir at law:[2]

> He prays that all future improvements shall be done at your expense out of the enormous income you are allowed.[3]

However, the chancellor agreed with Denis Mahon's suspect surmise, that everything possible should be done for the health and comfort of Maurice at this time of life.[4] Despite the warnings from Tom Conry (agent), that if he continued with such fanciful work, he would saddle the

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1 12 June 1844, P M Papers NL MS 10,121

2 13 June 1845, P M Papers NL MS 10,101.4

3 ibid.,

4 18 June 1845 ibid.,

estate with debts which could 'drain the estate too deep where it could crumble and run dry:[5]

> The estates in chancery are notoriously ill-managed and neglected. The only power which appears to be exercised by this court is that of exacting the uttermost farthing of rent. Tenants in consequence become degraded, and left to themselves let and sublet, to their own great injury and that of the estate.[6]

The ten years administration by the Court of Chancery and the ad hoc committee had left Strokestown estate mismanaged, disorganised and in debt. Denis Mahon's plan for the restoration of Strokestown House to its former glory was continued on his inheritance in 1845. The mismanagement resulted in the accumulation of £13,000 in rent arrears, which Mahon was determined to clear. The re-imbursement of arrears was a growing concern as Lady Catherine sued the Major for her share of rent arrears. This further alienated his tenants, who reacted with rent strikes and 'combinations'.[7] In Nov. 1846 John Ross Mahon of Guinness and Mahon in Dublin and cousin of Denis Mahon, was hired as agent to reform the estate and make it a viable business.[8] Firstly, he attempted to persuade Denis to make reductions on rent arrears as a means of enticing some payment. Denis Mahon was against accommodating this and felt tenants were simply taking advantage of current situations 'to carry out their system of combination not to pay any rent.'[9] Yet, between 1846-

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5 12 June 1845 ibid.,

6 James Hack Tuke, Transactions during the Famine 1846 - '84 (Dublin, 1852) and Stephen J. Campbell, The Great Irish Famine words and images from the Famine museum Strokestown Park, County Roscommon. pg 13

7 21 Nov. 1846, P M Papers NL MS 10,102.1

8 ibid.,

9 ibid.,

51, Roscommon possessed the third highest level of excess mortality, after Mayo and Sligo.[10] (Studies have shown that the counties with the lowest incomes per capita and the highest rates of illiteracy were also the counties with the greatest excess mortality and vice versa.[11]) However, Denis Mahon continued with his theory of tenants abusing the current situations not to pay rent. In his confession shortly after the murder, J R Mahon proceeded to qualify the management of the estate:

> knowing the combination which existed against the payment of rent I drew out lists of persons on several townlands dividing them into three classes. From the riches I demanded only one years rent, form the second class only hold a years rent and from the third nothing.[12]

In the wake of the murder he states that he did 'not press for the remainder but would give time.'[13] Nevertheless, his whole business outlook was, and his ideas for reforming the estate were, one of regarding the tenants as numbers with some being assets and others liabilities.

J R Mahon provided Major Mahon with a detailed survey and set out ideas for the reform of the estate. He wished to continue to reduce arrears in rent to entice some payment and to provide seeds to the tenantry. However, the Major placed certain stipulations and only wished seed to be provided to those tenants who were 'industriously inclined and not connected with the non-payment of rent party.'[14] The

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10 J. Mokyr, Why Ireland Starved pp268-75 and Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I.,V. 352

11 ibid.,

12 8 Nov 1847, P M Papers NL POS928

13 ibid.,

14 5 Dec 1846,P M Papers NL MS 10,102.2

seed was purchased from money borrowed from the government.[15] He categorically stated the plans developed by J R Mahon have to be of use and economically viable as 'there are few of us (landlords) in the present state of things able to use his pocket and provide seed for a large tenantry'.[16] Throughout Ireland it was reported that the seed for the next year's crop was being eaten. One Board of Works inspector reported that 'The land is neglected ..... partly from the inability to get seed and partly from the feeling that if they do sow it the landlord will seize the crop'. The latter came from the fear that they would have no other means of paying their rent.[17] The Major regarded such seed provision to tenants as a loan to be repaid. Nevertheless, J R Mahon urged him not to rely on the reduction of rent and the issue of seed as a means of returning the estate to profit, as destitute tenantry would not be so easily returned to self-sufficiency.[18]

The main aim of the Mahon estate during this period was to reduce the large tenantry. This was a countrywide objective as Irish landowners had long-desired the consolidation of holdings on a large scale.[19] The rental income of landowners, especially in the west, was considerably reduced during the famine years. Many owners of overcrowded estates were faced with serious problems of collecting rents and finding the

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15. 7 March 1847 ibid.,

16 ibid.,

17 Cecil Woodham Smith The Great Hunger (London, 1962) 148

18 28 Feb 1847 op cit.,

19 Vaughan, N.H.I.,V. 332-349

means out of their diminished incomes to discharge heavy poor rates and to provide additional employment:[20]

> I further approve of making a reduction in any lands that may be considered as overset.[21]

J R Mahon felt this could be best achieved by an organised Emigration Plan. Major Mahon reluctantly accepted this Plan under the threat of resignation by his agent,[22] who felt,

> 'it would be better to pay them something to emigrate and let the land be waste a year, sooner than keep such paupers on it.'[23]

J R Mahon argued that unless the greater part of the tenant population were removed

> 'the poor rates of this electoral division will exceed the receipts of rent and the division being almost entirely your property - the large part of the poor rate must fall upon you'[24]

And unquestionably, larger holdings would yield better returns. He devised a scheme that would not effect the whole Mahon estate but concentrated on eight townlands in the 'Roscommon Poor law Union Strokestown electoral division'[25] which amounted to 2,105 acres, occupied by 479 families making a total of 2,444 people.[26] This scheme was a product of the Poor Law Extension Act which made landlords

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20 ibid.,

21 21 Nov 1846 P M Papers NL MS 10,102.1

22 7 March 1847 P M Papers NL MS 10,102.2

23 28 March 1847 op cit.,

24 April 1847 op cit.,

25 23 July 1847 P M Papers NL MS 10,104.4

26 ibid., and Campbell, 42

responsible for maintaining their own poor and it was financially more viable to pay for their emigration than upkeep. Major Mahon insisted on a selective process and preferred to pay for tenants from whom they would receive 'some land and houses in return for forgiveness of all rent and the great expense of sending them out'.[27] He was against paying passages for those involved in the conspiracy of 'combination', the only concession he offered if they relinquished their land and paid their own way was that 'we may forgive them rent due'.[28] He refused to accommodate any degree of middlemen whether large or small:

> I consider it hard to send out people who not only owe the rent but also leave a parcel of pauper tenants'.[29]

Yet, he provided the inspiration and motivation for the eviction of under-tenants by providing an alternative clause: that he would consider payment of passage if they first got rid of their undertenants.[30] There was fervent activity to implement the emigration plan while tenants were receptive to it. This urgency led to increased expense as Major Mahon borrowed the necessary money at a high rate of interest as he regarded it 'better to take advantage of the present moments, to get rid of them'.[31] He qualified this high rate of borrowing as he feared if they delayed execution, the prices of passage could increase and vessel owners would elevate their demands.[32] J R Mahon concluded that in many instances compensations were given to tenants. The Mahon estate also purchased

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27 5 June 1847, P.M. Papers NL MS 10,102.2

28 ibid.,

29 7 June 1847, P.M. Papers NL MS10,102.3

30 ibid.,

31. 15 June 1847, ibid.,

32 28 April 1847 P.M. Papers NL MS 10,102.4

crops and stock from tenants which were subsequently resold and the money placed in the emigration account to cover expenditure of the plan.[33]

Emigration of course, did offer the chance of escape which was utilised by 2.1 million Irish adults and children between 1845 and 1855.[34] Studies have concluded that during those years more people left Ireland than in the previous two and a half centuries.[35] The famine was a catalyst in that it increased the numbers emigrating, but was not the initiator of mass exodus as commonly believed. As many as 351,000 sailed from Ireland to North America alone between 1838 and 1844 - an average of slightly more than 50,000 a year as compared with an annual average of approximately 40,000 from 1828 to 1837.[36] However, the numbers for landlord assisted emigration during the years 1846-52 are relatively low and 'can scarcely have exceeded 50,000 in extent'.[37] Yet assisted emigration was responsible for the movement of population from places where congestion was most severe.[38] It has been regarded as a more humane approach than mere eviction. Nevertheless, it offered little choice to a pauperised tenant who could not pay rent and was faced with eviction or assisted emigration. In relation to the figures provided, few emigrated under such assistance. Although assistance existed in

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33 8 Nov 1847 P M Papers NL pos 928

34 Vaughan (ed.). N.H.I..V. p353

35 Kerby A Miller, Emigrants and exiles: Ireland and the Irish exodus to North America (New York + Oxford 1985) p291 and ibid

36 ibid.,

37 Edward and Williams TheGreat Famine: Studies in Irish history p335 and op cit,. Vaughan

38 ibid.,

Strokestown estate, it did not save a fair number of tenants from eviction.[39]

The U.S. Congress passed two passenger bills in March 1847 which reduced the number of passengers per tonnage of ships from the British Isles.[40] This resulted in a large increase in the cost of passage to New York which far exceeded the £4.00 that had previously been charged. J R Mahon investigated the extent and cost of passages. He concluded that North America was the most viable and cheapest destination for the Strokestown tenants.[41] The cost of passage to Quebec was quoted as £3.30 for adults and £1.11.6 for children, who were regarded as half.[42] In his investigation, J R Mahon did not simply settle on the cheapest passage but also enquired about employment prospects. Mr Gale, a surveyor advised him that Quebec offered the best means of employment. Unless, the tenants had the ability to travel five hundred or a thousand miles inland which would make the US more preferable.[43]

In total Major Mahon provided £4,000 which covered the cost of passage for 476 people who sailed on the 'Virginius' from Liverpool in May, 100 on the 'Erin's Queen', 350½ on the 'Naomi' and 55 on the 'John Munn'.[44] The Strokestown tenants, in the context of assisted

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39 7 June 1847 P M Papers NL MS 10,102.3

40 C. Woodham Smith, The Great Hunger p239

41 8 April 1847 P M Papers NL MS10,104.2

42 ibid.,

43 ibid.,

44 15 June 1847 P M Papers NL MS10,102.3
12 May 1847 NL MS 10,102.2
24 May 1847 ibid.,
5 June 1847 ibid and op cit, Campbell p 41

emigration, were provided for better than the great majority who only received their fares.[45] They were supplied with a sea-store of tea, coffee, sugar, rice, oatmeal, dried fish and vinegar,[46] which Oliver Mac Donagh[47] regards as intelligently prepared and extraordinarily lavish if the estate accounts can be believed. The initial preparations show that Major Mahon was not enthusiastic about furnishing tenants with anything beyond their fare:

> I think the paying of the passage and if absolutely necessary giving rations, is quite enough for me to pay, I am not getting any large holdings[48]

Major Mahon relied heavily on his cousin's administration skills and J R Mahon held a large degree of freedom. The Major was convinced that his agent would follow policies that would be for the good of the estate.[49] His accommodation of J R Mahon led the Major to surcome to manipulation in certain instances. The continued threat of his agent's resignation inhibited him and made the Major more receptive to his ideas. This free hand which J R Mahon mildly extorted was instrumental in dictating policy.[50] He was the instigator of the emigration plan and enticed extra money from the Major, as he firmly believed 'that the business should be done well'.[51]

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45 Edwards and Williams The Great Famine p333

46 Op cit, Campbell p41

47 Op cit, Edward and Williams pp319-389

48 19 April 1847 P M Papers NL MS 10,102.4

49 28 April 1847 ibid.,

50 28 June 1847 P M Papers NL MS 10,102.2

51 20 May 1847 ibid.,

Yet, on the arrival of the tenants, reports which circulated showed results which were contrary to this objective:

> the Virginius left Liverpool for Quebec with 476 passengers (all Strokestown tenants), of whom 158 died on the voyage and 106 were landed sick.....the few that were able to come on deck were ghastly, yellow looking spectres, unshaven and hollow cheeked .....not more than six or eight were really healthy and able to exert themselves'.[52]

The fever riddled emigrants brought disaster to Canada; the fever spread, Canadian officials were unable to supply quarantine areas, and by July quarantine had virtually been abandoned. The hospitals were overwrought, unable to house the mammoth numbers, and the sick were infirmed in large sheds. There was no attempt to regulate landlord assisted emigration which infuriated Adam Ferrie, Chairman of the Emigration Committee.[53] In an open letter, dated 11 Dec 1847 to British Colonial secretary Earl Grey, Ferrie complained of the hordes of starving paupers who were shipped to North America without regard to humanity or common decency.[54] He denounced landlords and he included Lord Palmerston and Major Mahon on the list.[55] An enquiry was held which investigated Palmerston and Robert Gore-Booth. Palmerston was represented by his agents Kincaid and Stewart, who concluded that emigration was necessary and tenants merely arrived half-naked and in rags in order to 'arouse compassion'.[56] Major Mahon was

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52 Op cit, Woodham-Smith p226

53 ibid., p228

54 ibid.,

55 ibid.,

56 ibid., p230

not represented at the committee and no enquiry was formulated on the Strokestown emigrants. The emigrants aroused just compassion: the landlords who assisted them only fury. Monuments remain which commemorate those, 'who, flying from pestilence and famine in Ireland in the year 1847, found in America but a grave'.[57] A commissioner for emigration in the US observed:

> If crosses and tombs could be erected on the water, the whole route of the emigrant vessels form Europe to America would long since have assumed the appearance of a crowded cemetary.[58]

Most of the people living in Ireland during this period were poor, poorer than in comparable economies in Europe. Poverty was not unique to the West of Ireland, though its consequences there were the most severe, but conditions were also difficult in the cottages of Armagh, in the grazing farms of the midlands and in the Wicklow mountains. In fact poverty was synonymous with life in Ireland.[59] Many of those who left had embraced emigration as the best and often only means of survival. However, the journey was most perilous for the emigrants travelling in 1847 and the worst conditions were found among passengers to Canada, the destination of Major Mahon's tenants, the mortality rate of emigrants to British North America in 1847 (including deaths at sea, in quarantine on the notorious Grosse Isle, or in hospital) was as much as 17 per cent.[60]

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57 ibid., p237

58 ibid., p238

59 J. Mokyr Why Ireland Starved p2

60 ibid pp267-8 and Vaughan (ed.), N.H.I.,V.

Initially, the mass exodus caused little hostility in Ireland and landlords who offered assisted emigration were often praised for their generosity. Some, like Major Mahon prided themselves on their generous spirit, yet it was nothing more than a small act of humanity with disastrous results. Major Mahon had regarded it as mutually beneficial to both parties. The promotion of emigration by Catholic priests and newspapers after 1845, ceased abruptly in late 1847.[61] Stories recounting the plight of those who had emigrated began to filter back and the tone of public discussion changed drastically. Priests, newspaper editors and Nationalist politicians of all factions began openly declaring emigration as forced exile.[62] This dramatic change in opinion has a direct correlation to the sudden realisation that the British government had discounted the famine as an imperial responsibility and terminated all major schemes of direct relief funded by the treasury. It was only after 1847 that it increasingly became the practice to lay the blame for emigration and the famine itself at Britain's door:

> God, so the story goes, may have sent the potato blight but the English caused the famine.[63]

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61 ibid.,

62. ibid.,

63 Michael J. Winstanley Ireland and the land question 1800-1992 (London and New York 1984)

Chapter 4

The emigration plan was pursued by Major Mahon to the limit his finances would permit. The accomplished clearances were not adequate and the emigration plan was replaced by eviction. He continued to pressurise and to make an example of certain tenants, in order to entice some payment from others:

> I say those ought to be proceeded against and put out of their land at least a few of them if only, for sample sake.[1]

However, Major Mahon did not limit himself to using eviction as mere example. He continued to utilise eviction to clear the estate of undesirable tenants. In certain instances he wished to remove tenants if they were not inclined to be 'improving tenants'.[2] These evictions, in the wake of the emigration plan, further alienated the remaining tenants on the Mahon estate. The conacre system was a constant source of dispute and discord between the labourer, farmer and landlord. There is a direct correlation between bouts of agitation and the residence of large numbers of labourers. In 1846, Roscommon recorded more cases of agitation than any other county in Ireland.[3] One hundred and three cases out of a total of one hundred and sixty-three were related to labourer agitation.[4] The large number of cases shows the dissatisfaction and extremity of

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1 28 Feb. 1847, P.M. Papers N.L. MS 10,104.2

2 21 Sept. 1847, ibid.,

3 M. Beames, Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy movements and their control in pre-famine Ireland, (Brighton 1983), 49

4 J.J. Lee 'Patterns of Rural Unrest in Nineteenth Century Ireland, in L. Cullen and F. Furet, (ed.), Ireland and France, 17th - 20th Centuries (Ann Arbor 1980), 223

conditions which affected Roscommon during the famine. The fact that Major Mahon continued to use eviction as a means of maintaining his estate show his negativism and ignorance of this situation.

On 2 November 1847, at the Four Mile House, on the road between Roscommon town and Strokestown, Major Denis Mahon was shot dead by unknown assailants. The shock of such action reverberated through the landed classes in Ireland:

> We have to record another bloody deed, the result of agrarian war which is still being waged in all its horrors between Irishmen for the soil of Ireland.[5]

The announcement of the murder in the Freeman's Journal firmly regarded agrarian disputed as the source of the folly. They reported that Major Mahon had caused immense displeasure by his refusal to continue the conacre system. That, coupled with the clearance of what he deemed surplus population through emigration and eviction, was seen as the main justification for his murder.[6]

In the wake of the murder, Henry Grattan continued in the vein that landlords were now reaping their just rewards. He felt it resulted from the disastrous condition of the people and the indifference manifested by landlords. He maintained that it was the catastrophic outcome of the Strokestown emigration plan which caused the people to turn against Major Mahon.[7] He proposed that the House of Commons 'should talk

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5 4 Nov. 1847, Freeman's Journal (Dublin)

6 ibid.,

7 29 Nov 1847, Hansard vol. XVU (London 1848)

off the inducements to crime, as well as the crime itself, for the purpose of preventing the one by removing the other'.[8]

The circulation of threatening letters to landed proprietors had become a common occurrence during the famine period. Major Mahon did not receive any such letters but the life of his agent, J. R. Mahon had been threatened. Earl Grey highlighted the foreboding climate under which landlords now laboured. In opposition to Grattan, he defended landlords and their rights to administrate their property:

> Threatening letters are sent, and lists made of those who are doomed, and these being followed up by the assassination of one or two persons on such lists, spreads terror and dismay among the rest, and if that course drives the others out of the country, or has the affect of preventing them from taking measures for the maintenance of their rights of property, the objects of combination are answered.[9]

The anxiety of landlords was further increased when five more landed proprietors were shot before January 1848. Branches of the Mahon family were not exempt from additional threats emanating from Strokestown. Mrs Mc Causland of Co. Londonderry, a cousin of the Mahon family, received a threatening letter with a Strokestown postmark:

> I am to inform you that, unless Mr Mc Causland becomes a better landlord in this country, he will share the same fate as the demon Major Mahon did. There are resolutions made in this country to take down all the tyrannising landlords; .....unless he changes, and gives a full remittance of all the arrears that is due to him, and begin

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8 ibid.,

9 29 Nov. 1847, ibid.,

> in the new with his tenants, as to think he is far from the wrath of this country is useless .....I hope that you will not suffer yourself to be a widow, the same as Mrs. Mahon.[10]

The civil unrest increased the degree of absenteeism in Ireland. Each landlord respectively wondered who would be next. The letter campaign had reached a serious climax and began to take on a more organisational aspect. The movement announced that a fund had been set up in America to aid the purchase of firearms and the payment of bounties for the assassination of certain landlords.[11]

Understandably, Major Mahon's daughter vowed she would never visit Strokestown again, as a result of the horrific crime against her family. Her husband, Henry Sandford Pakenham-Mahon was advised 'to forget for five years at least that you have such a thing as property in Roscommon, to leave it totally in the hands of your agent. Amuse yourself and your dear wife as youth and circumstances will for the time present, and trust to a gracious providence that at that time you will have a chance of returning, to an altered country and breaking entirely fresh ground.'[12]

However, Henry ignored such advice and amalgamated his own large property with the Strokestown estate, amassing an acerage of almost thirty thousand. This saved the estate from passing into the realm of the Court of Chancery and almost certain destruction. Despite the atmospheric tension and fear circulating among the landed proprietors,

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10 ibid.,

11 ibid.,

12 undated, P.M. Papers N.L. MS 10,103.1

Henry pursued an aggressive and relentless policy. He instigated widespread evictions and he instructed his agent to eject the tenants of the Doorty townland, where the Major had been murdered.[13] These ejectments were implemented under a new policy. He introduced the concept of offering gratuities to tenants, which equalled the price of eviction in return for the surrender of land:

> you cannot lay out money better than in giving small sums to persons surrendering that holdings, which no-one would buy when covered with cottier pauper tenants[14]

J.R. Mahon withdrew from direct involvement with the estate. His partner, Mr Guinness began to handle the agencies business in Strokestown as Mahon felt 'it is better not to go myself as the people are as much exasperated against me as ever, and of course will continue so, as long as we are getting possession of so many houses'.[15] It was now easier to carry out the procedure of ejectments since conditions of virtual martial law prevailed in the region. Following Henry's directions, houses were demolished as inhabitants who refused to surrender were forcibly evicted. Nevertheless, the threats had not abated and Henry was informed that 'Dalton, your bailiff got some blows on Friday night from two men who attacked him'.[16] Henry's vicious, relentless policy was more extreme than that pursued by Major Mahon. The suffering and evictions which were imposed in the wake of the murder, almost

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13 11 Jan. 1848, P.M. Papers, Strokestown Park (hereafter S.P.)

14 14 Jan 1848, ibid.,

15 4 Feb. 1848, ibid.,

16 12 Dec. 1848, P.M. Papers NL MS 10,103.1

certainly saved the estate from bankruptcy and the encumbrance court. The Mahon estate was one of the few that survived the famine. It was achieved by a dogged determination to clear the estate of small holdings.

The Freeman's Journal recognised that the murder of landlords was not the answer to curbing the agrarian disputes:

> the murderous 'clearances', the desolation, the levelling and burning of villages wrought by landlords - the still more bloody 'clearances' of landlords wrought by peasants.[17]

It called on legislative intervention to end the criminal mutual extermination. The Crime and Outrage Bill was passed on 20 December 1847. It provided the Lord Lieutenant with the power to draft militia into a disturbed district. On such occurrences, the district was liable to pay rates in order to maintain a force at hand. The act also made provision for the detention of all males aged between sixteen and sixty for questioning by the police in the event of a murder.[18]

Numerous theories surround the mysterious murder of Major Mahon. One such theory apportions some blame on the Catholic church. A disagreement arose between Fr. Mc Dermot and Major Mahon over administrative technique of the Board of Guardians. Allegedly, Major Mahon accused Fr. Mc Dermot of mismanaging the workhouse in Roscommon and he retaliated by chiding the Major for his extensive absenteeism. Sources concluded that Fr. Mc Dermot was extremely displeased at the affrontment on his character and denounced Major

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17 4 Nov. 1847 Freeman's Journal (Dublin)

18 20 Dec. 1847, Hansard vol. XCU (London 1848)

Mahon from the pulpit on the following Sunday. The Mahon family credited this action as the instigation of hatred against Major Mahon. This theory circulated widely and caused Fr. Mc Dermot's superior, Bishop Browne, to formally defend him in the Freeman's Journal against the defaming allegations.[19] The factual precision of such theories are in doubt, however the public method which the Catholic Church employed to distance themselves from the allegations, succeeded in only strengthening their connection to the crime. Bishop Browne did not merely defend Fr. Mc Dermot or absolve him of any connection, but chose instead to provide a clear account of the extent of displacement on the Mahon estate. He referred to Major Mahon's high standing and his kindness to the poor and he agreed with the legal rights of landlords to administrate their estates as they see fit.[20] He acknowledged the large amounts of rent and arrears which were due to the Major. But, he argued that evictions cannot be justified 'in a year of famine, pestilence, and desolation'.[21] He regarded the murder as a clear result of inhuman policies, which between eviction and emigration, saw the dispossession of three thousand and six souls.[22] The structure of the letter almost relinquishes the guilty, and it alludes to the murder as a justifiable crime. This subtle opinion coupled with the celebratory bonfires and "the sympathy which existed with the murderer and the invariable practice of

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19 29 April 1848, Freeman's Journal (Dublin)

20 ibid.,

21 ibid.,

22 ibid.,

concealing him from the hands of Justice',[23] made it necessary to secure a prompt conviction for the infamous crime.

The witnesses procured for the trial by the prosecution were enticed by a promise of re-occupation of their houses, despite arrears in rent. Yet, those who acted in such a manner were quickly ostracised by their friends and neighbours, and existed under a torrid of threats:

> There is a great anger towards me, because I was the first man that ever gave information on those who killed the Major, I got them taken.[24]

Patrick Hasty, Thomas Cummins, Martin Brennan and Michael Gardiner were tried for the murder of Major Mahon on 12 July 1848. The attorney-general prosecuted the case as a favour to the family. Hasty was charged with the murder itself, in that he had charged the shot to be fired by Cummins. He was also charged with soliciting persons to murder Major Mahon, and for collecting and subscribing money to pay a bounty to the murderer. A number of witnesses, John Hestor, John Brennan, James Donnelly and Pat Flynn,[25] swore that the defendants of the case were guilty.

Retrospectively, the convictions and the apportionment of guilt are in doubt. The rewards for witnesses were too high to prevent bias and the involvement of the attorney general as prosecutor leaves questions over the impartiality of the judicial system in this case. Hasty was convicted

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23 16 Dec. 1847, Hansard vol. XCU (London 1848) and 20 Dec. 1846, Freeman's Journal (Dublin)

24 25 Aug. 1848, P.M. Papers S.P. MS 451.040

25 10 April 1981, Roscommon Herald

and hanged on 8 August 1848. A large number attended his funeral which J.R. Mahon felt it 'clearly shows the feeling of the people to be as bad as ever'.[26] James Cummins was convicted and executed in March 1849. Gardiner was also found guilty of the murder, but his death sentence was later committed to transportation for life to a crown penal colony.[27]

It is clear that there was considerable support for the conspiracy against Major Mahon. His extermination did not infuse his tenantry with any sense of guilt, but was greeted with enthusiasm and satisfaction. This euphoria was short-lived and quashed by the hard-line policies instigated by Major Mahon's son-in-law. Nevertheless, the question remains - who was responsible for the conspiracy? The organisation behind the murder of a prominent landlord extends beyond mere cottier involvement. The expense of hiring an assassin, the planning and the execution of such action is not simply a result of dissatisfaction. The murder can be regarded as a methodical middle class operation. By 1847, landlords were fleeing their estates and Ireland under the threat of extermination. Likewise, bankrupt estates were divided and sold to prosperous farmers. Financial gain and prosperity are often the necessary instigation to incite crime, and once landed proprietors are inspired to leave their property, it can be broken up and purchased at a bargain rate. However, it would be misleading to regard the murder of Major Mahon as simply a product of financial greed, it may have provided some motivation for the crime.

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26 12 Aug 1848, P.M. papers N.L. MS 10,103.5

27 op cit.,

Yet, the celebration of cottiers and labourers in the wake of the murder, shows the extent of infuriation which Major Mahon's policies inspired.

Conclusion

The Mahon estate and its management are reflective of a standard that existed throughout Ireland, it was neither extreme in its administration or lax in its commitment Major Mahon's papers attempt to portray just and honourable motives opperating within the structures of an economically viable estate. However, his policies contradict his efforts to present a humanitarian front. One can argue that he attempted to help his tenants by his emigration policy, donations of seed, loans and rent credits. Nevertheless, no policies were pursued which were detrimental to the preservation of the estate. Major Mahon's contempories commended him for his genorosity and his selfless acts for the poor. Yet, was it selfless and humane to implement a buisness criteria during a catastrophic famine? The Mahons, and the landed class from which they hailed, were selectively blind despite their prophestations to the contrary. Major Mahon recognised the plight of a large number of pauperised tenants, but merely saw them as liabilities to the estate. Although Major Mahon accused tenants of utilising the fact of the famine to avoid rent payment.Likewise, he seized the opportunity to use the famine as a means of clearing his estate of small holdings.

The question which must be addressed-was the murder of Major Mahon a justifiable one? Tenants had few chances to make their grievances known to landlords. However, the Mahon tenantry were very successful with their rent strikes and combinations. These actions were too successful as it inspired extreme reactions from Major Mahon. The murder of Major Mahon did not relieve tenants of evictions or ongoing threats. The extreme action worked in reverse, it produced a military controlled society in Strokestown, and initated widespread clearances under the acute management of Henry Sandford Pakenham-Mahon. The relationship between landlords and tenants was consistently contentious throughout Irish history. However, the actions instigated by the Mahon tenantry increased hatred and bias which further alienated the interdependent groups.

Nicholas Mahon, great grandson of Major Mahon, has made analogies between the Irish and modern famines. In an attempt at exorcising the actions of his ancestors he claims that Major Mahon did everything within his power, and modern agencies despite professional organisation cannot deal with the tragic consequences of famine. This claim has certain validity, yet it does not excuse the management policies instigated on the Mahon estate. The murder of Major Mahon was a tragedy which was not merely a product of famine extremities, it also resulted from blatant non compromise between Mahon and his tenantry. The famine changed the traditional structure of the Mahon estate. The

assisted emigration plan and the mass clearances, achieved the desired effect of reducing small holdings. The Strokestown estate was turned into a more efficient economic entity and Major Mahon became a product of his own policies.

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